

George Washington's Chain of Expresses

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Background

During the course of the Revolutionary War, George Washington was responsible for creating at least two Expresses in 1780. The first is known as Jefferson's Line of Expresses and the other as Washington's Chain of Expresses. Both were created under the same circumstances. That is, to inform General Washington immediately of the movements of the British forces and to coordinate the arrival of, and communication with, the French fleet and military.

The typical express rider of the 1780s, military or civilian, wasn't what we think of as express in today's terminology or as in the Line or Chain Express rider. The typical express rider then, was a person whose sole purpose (supposedly not to be distracted with other things) was to ride from point A to point B. This could be any distance from a few miles to over a hundred miles. He would ride an average of fifteen to twenty miles a day, stopping to eat and care for his horse as well as a night's sleep for them both. He would continue on the following day and repeat the same until he arrived at his destination.

Both of these Washington operations were truly expresses, the rider would ride a set amount of miles, then pass on their letters etc. to another rider who would repeat the process. They rode their set mileage (~15-20 miles) day and night, regardless of inclement weather, until the final rider completed the trip.

This story could have been written about either express, but Washington's Line of Expresses is presented as the author has a cover from that express. The regular posts were the normal means of communication between George Washington and his correspondents while in command of the Army. This was augmented by express riders in employ of the Army, who carried letters and intelligence of an immediate nature. But there were problems with this method that did not satisfy the needs of Washington. The Headquarters of the Army was constantly on the move. The regular post were being disrupted by Loyalists to the British. Express riders at times lost the mail, had it stolen, or were stopped by the enemy. These were some of the problems that created the need to find a more secure and rapid means of uninterrupted communication.

The earliest mention that I have found from Washington using the term "Chain of Expresses" is in a letter to Robert Erskine in Rhode Island on the 17th of July 1778, concerning the arrival of the French.

*That you may have the earliest intelligence of his arrival, you should establish a Chain of Expresses from some commanding View upon the Coast to your Quarters.*¹

Nothing came of this as the arrival of the French was delayed. An Act of Congress of 27 December 1779 stated:

*That all express riders in the pay of the United States be discharged, and that no established express riders be in future maintained at the public expense.*¹

This was a consequence of the proposed regulation in the Post Office. By the end of January a total of 112 riders including 28 at Philadelphia were dismissed.¹ Washington accepted this with the exception of Expresses assigned to the Main Army (10), the Post in the Highlands (1), Fishkill (5), and Fort Pitt (1).¹

This reduction was circumvented by the hiring of wagoner's who were used as expresses. In a letter Washington wrote on the 16th of March 1780 to Udney Hay:

*When the Army requires the services of the waggoners now employed as expresses and should the necessity continue for extending the number of express riders beyond the establishment you will use your discretion, proportioning what you may be obliged to call in to the real exigency of the case, and dismissing them as soon as that exigency is over. However useful the number of stationary expresses which you point to, may be considered, yet we must not attempt any further innovation on this at this time.*¹

The British, who had occupied Newport since December of 1776, evacuated this city in October 1779. Even though the British abandoned Newport, their fleet deployed to a secure staging area off of Gardiner's Island on the eastern tip of Long Island. From here they patrolled the waters of Long Island Sound between New York and Rhode Island. In early July 1780, a French expeditionary force under the command of the Count Donatien de Rochambeau landed in Newport to assist in the American cause. General Washington needed to coordinate the efforts of the French and American forces and also be aware of the position and movement of the British Fleet. These two occurrences set forth the reasons for Washington to establish a Chain of Expresses.

CONNECTICUT CHAIN of EXPRESSES (1st Stage)

From Robinson's House near West Point, on the 31st of July 1780, General Washington was busy writing letters on establishing the Chain of Expresses, this to William Heath.

*I shall direct relays of Expresses the whole way between this Army and you to convey intelligence in the most expeditious manner. The nearest Express to you will be upon Tower Hill.*¹

In another he ordered Colonel Elisha Sheldon, who was Commandant of the 2nd Regiment, Continental Light Dragoons to set up the line of communications.

Sir:

*You will be pleased instantly upon Receipt of this to send off an Officer with sufficient number of Dragoons to Post three at every fifteen Miles distance between New London on the lower Road and the Head Quarters of the Army, which will be in West Chester County. The enclosed letter to Mr. Shaw of New London is to solicit that Gentleman to continue the Chain by hired Expresses from thence to Tower Hill. But should he inform your Officer that he cannot accomplish the Business, your Dragoons must be moved forward to Tower Hill three at every eleven Miles and we must fill up what will be wanting at this End. The intent of posting these Men, is to convey intelligence in the most expeditious manner to and from Rhode Island. You will therefore pick out such as may be depended upon to ride at all hours whenever dispatches arrive at their quarters.*¹

The dragoon officer Colonel Sheldon dispatched to deliver this letter (Fig. 1) to Nathaniel Shaw was George Hurlbut a native of New London.¹ To Shaw he wrote:

Head Quarters Robinson's House 31st. July 1780

Sir

In the present situation of affairs, it is indispensably necessary that we should have the most instantaneous advises of the movements of the Enemy at Rhode Island. For this purpose I have posted relays of Dragoons at every 15 Miles distance between New London and the Head Quarters of the Army. This taking as many as we can conveniently spare. I shall be exceedingly obliged to you to hire as many trusty Men with their Horses as will continue the Chain from New London to Tower Hill, posting three at every 15 Miles, with orders to ride by night or by day whenever dispatches arrive at their quarters. I will be answerable for their pay while in service, which will be as long as the British Fleet and Army continue at or off Rhode Island. Should you not be able to accomplish this Business, you will inform the Officer, the Bearer of this, who must in that

case carry the Dragoons the whole way through, however inconvenient it may be. I shall also be obliged to you to have a constant look out kept upon the sound, and if the Fleet appear standing from the Eastward toward New York, to give me instant intelligence of it by the Chain of Expresses-

I am with great Respect

Sir

yr. most Ob'. Serv'.

G. Washington

Nathan' Shaw Esq.:

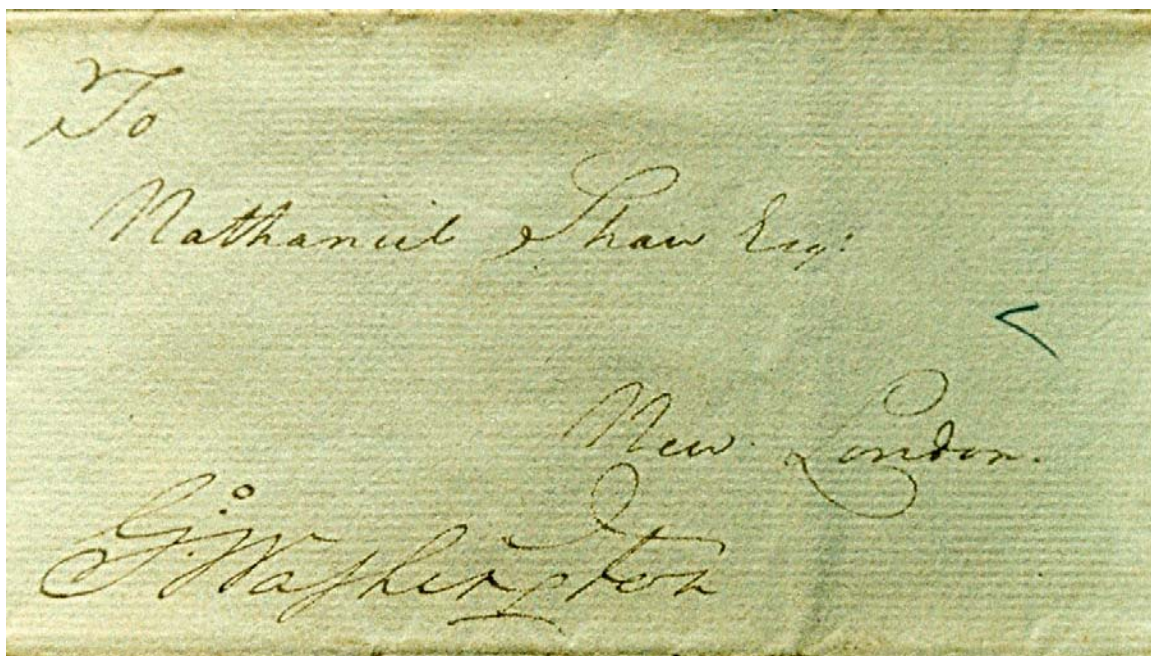


Fig. 1: Washington's letter: Datelined Robinson's House, 31 July 1780.
(New London County Historical Society)

General Washington manned this Chain of Expresses with Dragoons from the Army and civilian riders, and stated that he would be responsible for the pay of the Civilians, hired by Shaw.

On August 1, Colonel Sheldon replied to Washington that an officer had been sent with enough trusty dragoons to accomplish the mission. The relay stations for the chain of expresses were to be at Stamford, Green Farms, Stratford, New Haven, Guilford, Lyme, and New London. Colonel Sheldon did not post any riders between Headquarters and Stamford, lest British raiders should seize the men or the dispatches. Though Colonel Sheldon followed General Washington's order in setting up the chain, he felt that such detachments lowered the combat capability of the Regiment.⁴

Nathaniel Shaw sent his reply to Washington in a letter datelined New London August 5, 1780. In this letter Shaw expresses his willingness to assist as best he could.³

New London August 5, 1780

Sir

I received yours by Capt Hurlbutt who sett out for Newport this day in order to Post the Dragoons for the Purpose you Mention and Every Assistance in my Power you may Depend. I shall give him-there is now a fleet of Ships just come to an Anchor of this Harbour, Consisting of about Fifteen or Sixteen, I believe mostly large Ships of the line and Imagine they are the same that were of Block Island. they have French Colours

Flying, what their Intentions is I Cannot Conceive, the Headmoast Ship came to an Anchor att 3 O'Clock PM and the Stern moast att 8 O'Clock, as the wind is they might have Continued their Coarse up the Sound, but their not making up the Oppertunity, I Suspect they have sum Design Against this Port, we have about one Thousand men hear, & Suppose Govenr Trumbull will Imediately order more, if any movement tomorrow will advise you. I am Sir

*Your very hume Servt.
Nathl Shaw*

Capt. Hurlbut returned to Headquarters from Rhode Island on August 8 and reported to Washington on the manner in which the chain of expresses had been stationed.⁴

An express bearing dispatches from Rhode Island had a close call on the road between Stanwich and Round Hill on the night of August 20. Galloping along in the summer night, he was fired on by a party of seven men. Happily, he escaped without injury and arrived safely at Round Hill, where the dispatches were received and forwarded by another express.⁴

Washington on the 21st of August informed Benedict Arnold that:

"There is a Chain of Expresses from Colonel Sheldon's quarters to Tower Hill." ¹

A report of August 26 shows that seventeen dragoons were detached to the express chain. Capt. Hurlbut was one of them, assigned to the New London terminus of the Chain of Expresses.⁵

Washington, on August 27, directed Sheldon to shift the line of expresses to a more northerly route. Just three days earlier an express had been captured at Pine's Bridge. Fortunately, the rider was not carrying dispatches.

"Instead therefore of going to Stratford by the present Route, I would have you withdraw the Dragoons from Stamford and Greens farms and place them upon the Road from King's ferry to Ridgefield and from thence to Stratford. This being higher up will be less exposed. Be pleased to inform the Quarter Master at King's ferry where you establish the Stage between that place and Ridgefield, that he may know how to forward the dispatches which are sent to him. You will make the change as speedily as possible." ¹

On September 7, two letters passed through Sheldon. One from Benedict Arnold to New York hoping to have the correspondent meet at Colonel Sheldon's command post. The other signed by J. Anderson who sought permission to meet a friend near his outpost. Anderson turned out to be John Andre, the British spy working with Arnold.⁴

In November Washington wrote Sheldon that dispatches via the Chain of Expresses from General Rochambeau's camp in Newport had repeatedly arrived at Washington's headquarters with the seals so broken that the contents could easily have been removed and examined. Some other dispatches suffered no damage, so the General suspected foul play at some of the stages. To counter any possible espionage, Washington directed the relief of the expresses by new ones and further relief every three or four weeks.¹

Head Quarters, Passaic Falls, November 10, 1780.

Sir:

The Covers of Most of the dispatches that have lately come from the Count de Rochambeau to me, by the Chain of Expresses, have been so broken, that it would have been an easy matter to have taken out the inclosures and discovered the contents. Had this been the case once or twice only, I should have attributed it to accident, but from the frequency of the thing, and no other Packets being broken but those of the Counts; I am led to suspect foul play at some of the Stages. It may perhaps be impossible to discover it, if it is so, but to prevent its going on, the safest way is to relieve all your present stationary Dragoons by a like number, and do the same every three or four Weeks. I

would wish you to endeavour to find out whether there is really any thing in what I suspect. I am etc.

P.S. Major Tallmadge will have occasion for a detachment of your dismounted Dragoons to execute a piece of Business intrusted to him.¹

Nathaniel Shaw had hired three civilian riders for the New London sector of the chain. Along with a November letter sent to Washington, he submitted his bill itemizing his expenses in this effort.³

New London Nov' 23d 1780

Sir

Agreeable to your Excellency's Letter of the 31st July last to establish a Chain of Expresses from N London to Tower Hill, and that you would be answerable for their pay while in Service, I found it necessary only to employ three trusty men & their Horses for this & the Post at Tower Hill for five days, before the French General releav'd those at Tower Hill, & Capt Hurlbut of Col. Sheldon's Reg^t Dragoons extended his Light Horsemen to this Post. The expense of which am^o £453.18^s/ as pr Bill Inclosed. After Capt Hurlbut had established his men at this post, I was obliged to find their Horses with Hay & Oats &c untill I could apply to His Excellency our Govenor to get an assistant DQM appointed at this Post. (which was much wanted before) the amo of which is £1462.10/ as pr Inclosed Bill. The Post is now supply'd by this DQM who is furnished with money from our Gov' & Council. I was in hopes of not troubling your Excellency with this trifling affair, as I made no doubt but it would be settled by this DQM according wrote to him to N. Hubbard QMG for his orders, & recd the following reply.

... neither can I pay the expense of the Express Riders provided by you, as I a entirely destitute of money, and have not the most distant prospect of a Supply - I should imagine you might get your money soonest by applying at Head Quarters." I am obliged therefore to take this liberty of Inclosing those Bills to your Excellency, and hope it will not be long before they are settled. The different Bills & Receipts if necessary can be forwarded. I have taken the most prudent care and attention in the expences.

The British Fleet still lie at Gardiners Bay, as I wrote you in my last, Making no movements excepting one or two Ships that are frequently running off Block Island & returning to them again.

I am with the greatest respect and esteem

Your Excellency
Most Ob^t & very Hum^{le} Serv^t
Nath^l Shaw

N.B. The above Fleet lies 3 miles WNW at Gardiners Point, (consisting 9 Sail of ye Line) 3 or four Miles South Plumb Island. It is said that Admiral Arbouthnot is to go to New York to take the Command their, when Admiral Rodney leaves it, & Admiral Graves to command in the Bay this Winter.

Yrs &c
N.S.

Washington on the 8th of December replied to Shaw that the:

Bills of Expense incurred in forwarding Dispatches between Rhode Island and Head Quarters are delivered to Col. Pickering QMG with an Order for settlement, which will be done, as soon as he shall receive any public money.¹

On the same day Washington also advised Colonel Sheldon that:

You may call in the Dragoons who were stationed as Expresses on the Road to New London.¹

They were relieved of their express duties.

Dispatches and letters for the time being were sent by the post as seen in this excerpt from Washington's letter to the Chevalier de la Luzerne on the 14th.

*Your Excellency's dispatches for Rhode Island, accompanying your letter to me, came to hand at the instant the Post was setting out, and was committed to his care. It is the only means of conveyance now left me, since the Chain of Expresses which was formed by the Dragoon Horses (and worn down) have been discontinued. The Quarter Master General has it not in his power, for want of money, to furnish an Express upon the most urgent occasion.*¹

CONNECTICUT CHAIN of EXPRESSES (2nd Stage)

The Chain of Expresses was reestablished for the second time. Now it passed through central Connecticut. This time it would be manned by Expresses, Dragoons and French Hussars.¹

The Chain of Expresses reopened on January 30, 1781. In a letter to Colonel Sheldon, Washington writes:

*The necessity of a regular and rapid communication between this place and Rhode Island has induced me to reestablish the Chain of Expresses. The Count De Rochambeau, to whom I have written, will I presume, make the necessary arrangements for conveyance from Rhode Island to Hartford. From which place to Litchfield the communication must be kept by Your Dragoons: and from thence to Head Quarters. Riders will be furnished by the Quarter Mastr. Genl. You will therefore be pleased to send immediately a party of Dragoons and have them posted as to support the communication proposed from Hartford to Litchfield, both Places inclusive, the Detachment to be under the direction of an officer or careful Sergt. and to be relieved as often as you think proper.*¹

Colonel Timothy Pickering the QMG was informed on February 2 of this implementation by David Humphreys, an Aide de Camp to General Washington:

Sir:

*It having been found necessary to reestablish a Chain of Expresses from Head Quarters to Rhode Island, the Communication will be kept up by Dragoons from the last mentioned place to Litchfield inclusive; from whence the General would have the chain continued by Riders furnished from your Department: One stage (exclusive of Fishkill, where there are always Expresses) he supposes will be sufficient. The most convenient place for this will be at Colonel Morehouse's or between that and Bull's Iron Work's, where by having two Riders stationed the Line of conveyance will be compleat.*¹

Pickering was directed by Washington in mid-February to establish a Chain of Expresses between Headquarters at New Windsor and Philadelphia for the speedy transportation of letters.¹

Ebenezer Hazard, the Post Master General petitioned Continental Congress War Board and Washington to provide escorts for the regular New Jersey post rider. Washington declined as he had not the horse or their substance, and it was with difficulty that he kept two Dragoons at Headquarters.¹ He told the War Board that Sheldon's Regiment consists of but sixty mounted Dragoons and would be worn down had they no other duty to do but that of furnishing four dragoons at a time to be constantly riding post. An alternative was suggested for them to request the Governor for use of the Volunteer Horse in Jersey.¹

On the 9th of June 1781, Rochambeau and the French troops under his command left Newport on a four-week march to Peekskill via Providence, Hartford, Danbury, and Ridgebury.

Washington wrote to Major Benjamin Tallmadge on the 24th:

*Be so good as to write me pr. the Chain of Expresses immediately on the Receipt of this, and inform when the Count de Rochambeau leaves Hartford; by what Rout he intends to come on and when he may be expected at my Head Quarters, which he will find at Peekskill.*¹

Tallmadge reported to Washington on June 25 that the French with Rochambeau had left Hartford.⁴

David Humphreys, General Washington's Aide De Camp wrote a letter to Jeremiah Wadsworth, at Hartford, which is illustrated below (Figure 2). It has written on its address leaf the notation of delivery via the Chain of Expresses. This is the only known letter from this post with the notation Chain of Expresses on the address leaf in private hands. There was no requirement to make this route designation on the letter. It is only through the courtesy of the letter writer that they so indicate Chain of Expresses. The letter though undated was most likely written and carried at the same time as the Washington-Tallmadge letter of 24 June 1781. There are probably other surviving covers that passed through the hands of the Chain of Expresses, but without any notation or docketing it can only be speculated.

Head Quarters, N Windsor

Dear Wadsworth

I hope, before a great while to see you in Camp - in the Mean time can you inform us, by what route the Count de Rochambeau comes, and when he may be expected at the North River without putting the Question pointedly to him- The General would wish some of us to meet & attend upon him, into the Camp-

I am yours Sincerely

D. Humphrys

Col. Wadsworth

please turn over

Shoud you be able to obtain a horse of the description proposed. I should be glad to have him forwarded by the Dragoons or otherwise as soon as convenient."

Fig. 2: Chain of Expresses letter written by Colonel David Humpherys. Datelined: Head Quarters, N Windsor. (Authors Collection)

Washington on June 28 ordered Colonel Sheldon to send two well-mounted dragoons to Danbury and two to Haight's Tavern on the plains, between Danbury and Peekskill, for special courier service. Each

pair was to be ready to ride by day or night. The assignment would be for only two or three days. Their expenses to be discharged by the Quarter Master General.¹

Continued operation of the Chain of Expresses that rode to the Eastward from American Headquarters was vital to Washington. Despite difficulties in detailing sufficient dragoons and horses, he found compelling reason to keep the chain in operation. With the arrival of Rochambeau the allies were now united. Washington still needed communications to the east to know quickly the plans of the French Admiral, DeGrasse.

On July 7 he ordered Sheldon to withdraw the chain of expresses from the upper road and to establish a new chain from headquarters at Dobb's Ferry by way of Bedford, Danbury, and Woodbury to Southington. French hussars would complete the chain from Hartford eastward. Each station would be manned by two dragoons drafted from those not fully accoutered or equipped.¹

SOUTHERN CHAIN

During February 1781, Washington set up a Chain of Expresses from Headquarters to Philadelphia. In a letter to Brigadier General Louis Le Beque Du Portail.

New Windsor, February 21, 1781.

Dear Sir:

I directed the Qr. Mr. Genl. (Colo Pickering) a few days ago, to establish a Chain of Expresses between this and Philadelphia for the speedy transportation of Letters. Write by these and request the Qr. Mr. in Phila. to forward the letter with all possible dispatch as I shall wait your answer and govern my departure by it. I am etc.

Tench Tilghman, directed by Washington, wrote this same day (February 21) to Colonel Pickering, Quartermaster General of the Continental Army:

The inclosed, as you may suppose, requires the utmost dispatch. There were some time ago relays of Expresses stationed between Govr. Jefferson and the president of Congress. If that Chain is yet kept up, it will be the speediest conveyance. If it is not, His Excellency requests you to send off a trusty Messenger immediately with the letter and give him orders upon the Quarter Masters on the Route for a change of Horses and Men if Necessary.⁴

The area of concern to Washington had now turned to extend the Chain further southward. On the 13th of July 1781, in a letter to the Marquis de Lafayette in Virginia, Washington writes that it is the utmost importance that a communication by a Chain of Expresses should be opened between this Army and that in Virginia.

Head Quarters near Dobbs's ferry, July 13, 1781.

My dear Marquis:

In the present situation of Affairs, it is of the utmost importance that a communication by a Chain of Expresses should be opened between this Army and that in Virginia. They are already established from hence to Philada. and if there are none from you to Philada. you will be pleased to take measures for having it done. You will also endeavour to establish such a communication with the Coast as to be able to know whether any troops are detached by sea from Lord Cornwallis's Army, for it is more than probable that if he finds himself baffled in over running Virginia he will take a strong post at Portsmouth [or Williamsburg] and reinforce New York or south Carolina. Should any detachment be made you will transmit me the earliest intelligence.¹

Another Washington letter to David Forman in New Jersey on the 21st of July concerning the anticipated arrival of Count de Grasse and the French Fleet says:

*That intelligence may be communicated from you to me with the utmost dispatch, you will be pleased to take some of the militia Horse into pay and station them at such distances between Monmouth and Dobb's ferry, that they may perform the ride in twelve or fifteen hours. The Horsemen need not know the particular purpose for which they are stationed, but they must be ordered never to be a moment absent from their stages, except when upon duty. The expense attending these and the persons who keep a lookout I will be answerable for.*¹

By January 1782, Forman had discharged the Horsemen because of the inactive winter season, and their continued service would be a very unnecessary expense to the public.¹

On the 15th of December 1781, Washington directed General Heath to have Sheldon furnish dragoons as relief escorts for the mail service between Fishkill and Morristown, a neighborhood subject to raids by enterprising Tories.¹

A letter to the QMG Pickering from Washington at Philadelphia on 21 February 1782 writes:

Sir,

*I wish to know what has been done to put the chain of Expresses between Williamsburg and this place upon a good footing for expediting the communication; and if farther wanting, that efficacious measures may be used for making the conveyance as certain and as rapid as possible.*¹

CONNECTICUT CHAIN of EXPRESSES (3rd Stage)

On August 11, 1782, the Adj. John Mix of the Second Connecticut Regiment was ordered to set up an express route from King's ferry and Boston. Colonel Sheldon furnished the Dragoons from King's ferry to Hartford. Twelve well-mounted dragoons were selected, with two each posted in the following areas: Haight's, Danbury, Carleton's Bridge, Breakneck, Southington, and Hartford. From Hartford to Boston the Line would be continued by the Quartermaster Department. These were stationed at a distance of 15 to 18 miles apart as the roads or other circumstances permitted. Lieutenant Mix would post them and provide for their subsistence and accommodations. Payment for their services were to be arranged with the Deputy Quartermasters of the States in which the expresses are stationed. The service was to be temporary and not excessive. The dispatches from the east were to be sent to Newburgh via a dragoon until word was received that Washington had moved his headquarters.¹

On September 1, army headquarters had moved to Verplank's Point, the chain of expresses would need to be modified. Those dragoons who had been stationed at Ludington's could now be moved and set up, as in the prior arrangement, pointing to King's Ferry.⁴

Washington, in a letter to Robert Morris on October 18, states that the Chain of Expresses was started around the middle of August and would probably be continued till the French Fleet sailed from Boston.¹

The regular post from New Jersey as of the 24th of October was still not secure from disruption by the British or their sympathizers. Washington, in a letter to Postmaster General Ebenezer Hazard suggested to him the direction the post was to ride to Headquarters at Newburgh. He wanted the mails sent by Morristown, from there direct to Colonel Searns, through Warwick and Chester to Newburgh. Though indirect and inconvenient to the people of Jersey, it was considered the safest. If the suggested route is not followed Washington stated that he would not use the post for any dispatches to or from Headquarters. Nor would any dragoons be furnished as escorts. The following day on the 26th of October 1782, Washington ordered the dragoon express chain from the Regiment to be moved and posted on the route from Fishkill through Litchfield to Hartford.¹

The Regiment was relieved of one of its express duties on December 29, 1782, when Timothy Pickering, the Quartermaster General, was told of the dissolution of the Headquarters to Boston express chain. Sheldon's Dragoons, who had manned the western links of the chain, were ordered to rejoin their corps.¹

General Washington issued a proclamation on 20 November 1783, discharging the Second Continental Light Dragoons. The above is but a small part of their involvement during the Revolutionary War.¹

1. Washington, George, Writings 1745-1799, John C Fitzpatrick, ed. (39 Vol's. Washington, 1932-1944).
2. New London County Historical Society, Nathaniel Shaw Papers.
3. Connecticut's Naval Office at New London, Collections Vol. II, Ernest E. Rogers, ed., 1933.
4. George Washington Papers, Library of Congress.
5. Revolutionary War Records (strength Report).